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ABSTRACT

The growth in California's student population currently exceeds the peak years of the baby boom generation by more than one million students. This increase, combined with deferred maintenance, has created a strain on the state's educational facilities. An analysis of this predicament is presented in this bulletin. It describes why California needs more school buildings and offers some statistics on the steady increases in enrollment. The state's new initiative to reduce class sizes has also created a demand for more classroom space. Furthermore, the state faces the prospect of investing billions of dollars to repair, maintain, and modernize schools. Many schools, due to age, present special challenges with regard to maintenance, asbestos, and radon. It is argued that educational facilities play an important part in education and that educators must recognize the ways that facilities directly affect student achievement. However, some innovations, such as smaller class size, will mean new school designs. Although reduced class sizes are desirable, they are more expensive and many schools already lack sufficient funds. Some of the actions that Californians can take to improve the present condition of schools are provided. A chart estimates the state's school facility needs for the next 5 years. (RJM)

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Clarifying Complex Education Issues

What Has Created California's School Facilities Predicament?

Government leaders and educators agree that the problem of school facilities has reached crisis proportions in California. Experts estimate the unfunded need at over $20 billion between now and 2002.

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Californians spent over $20 billion on school facilities from 1986 to 1996. But as large as that investment might sound, it has been inadequate to meet a tremendous statewide need. That need arises from two sources. One is the growth in California's student population, which today exceeds the peak years of the "baby boom" by over one million students. The other problem is the number of older school buildings in need of repair, renovation, and modernization.

California Needs More School Buildings

Educators and political leaders from both parties agree that California must have a steady supply of new school buildings to meet the current and projected need. That need arises both from the growth in student population and changes in educational programs, particularly California's class size reduction program.

Enrollments Continue to Grow

The California Department of Finance estimates that the state will add over 300,000 new students in the five years from 1997-98 to 2001-02, bringing the total number of K-12 students to nearly six million.

Many California school districts are struggling to catch up with the housing needs caused by this enrollment growth. Most recently, high schools have felt increasing pressure as the students who flooded elementary schools in the late 1980s enter the secondary system.

Another dilemma is that much of the growth in student population since 1980 has not been in the same areas where the "baby boom" generation grew up. So while a school district in Silicon Valley might have old school sites that are leased out, another district in Riverside County has seen its student population grow from 17,000 to 31,000 in just the past ten years and has had to build new facilities.

Smaller Class Sizes Have Reduced School Capacities

California's class size reduction program (CSR) has also had a profound effect on school facilities. In the first two years of CSR implementation — 1996-97 and 1997-98 — California's elementary schools added about 28,000 new classroom spaces through a variety of strategies, including a heavy reliance on portable classrooms. They reduced class sizes for an estimated 85% of the state's kindergarten through third grade students. If schools throughout the state had reached full implementation in 1997-98, it could have required from 2,000 to 4,000 more classroom spaces.

Schools Require Maintenance and Modernization

The California Department of Education (CDE) reports that 55% of California's public school buildings are over 30 years old. The state faces the prospect of investing billions of dollars to repair, maintain, and modernize these aging schools. Due simply to their age, many schools are in need of basic repairs and routine maintenance. To add to the problem, many school buildings have been poorly maintained. Declines in general school funding over the last 20 years led many districts to defer preventive maintenance expenses in order to maintain education programs. As a result, some school facilities are now in a state of serious physical disrepair.

In addition, a major investment in modernization is essential to enable schools to use computers and other technology as part of their instructional program. Many older classrooms have one or two electrical outlets, and no telephone connections. In 1994-95 the U.S. General Accounting Office asked school officials to evaluate whether their school had sufficient infrastructure — such as phone lines, conduit, and power — for data, voice, and video systems. In every category, the majority of California respondents rated their schools' infrastructures as "insufficient."

School districts are also required to comply with a variety of federal mandates. These include removing safety hazards such as asbestos and radon, and making sure school programs are accessible to people with disabilities. In general, these mandates add to the cost of renovation, repair, or construction projects.

Facilities Play a Part in Educational Quality

In what ways does a school facility either enhance or inhibit student performance? And what implications do new educational strategies related to education reform have on how schools

should be designed? As school facilities become a more pressing issue — in California and nationally — researchers, policymakers, and school planners are addressing these two important questions.

Facilities Directly Affect Student Achievement

Research evidence and common sense both indicate that there is a minimum level of quality for a school facility below which student and teacher effectiveness can be seriously compromised. A variety of studies conducted since 1982 throughout the United States indicate that students achieve less in school buildings which are situated on noisy streets, have too many students for their capacity, or cannot be adequately and safely maintained.

Many researchers also believe that smaller is better, both in terms of class size and school size. And while there is no universal agreement about the optimum size for a school, there appears to be growing conviction among researchers that student achievement would be improved if schools were smaller than they are now in California. The challenge for schools is that "smaller" is also more expensive and many school communities are already hard pressed to provide adequate school facilities.

School Reform Calls for New School Designs

Many experts on school reform and school facilities see a fundamental mismatch between how schools need to operate and the buildings most schools occupy. In one publication after another, both state and national experts characterize existing school facilities as obstacles to educational improvement.

Schools need enough room to allow students to move around, areas designed for special activities such as science labs and library/media centers, and space in which to display and store student projects. Such space is woefully missing in many California schools.

ESTIMATES FOR CALIFORNIA SCHOOL FACILITY NEEDS FOR FIVE YEARS, 1997-98 TO 2001-2002

Projected Growth

- **Estimated Student Population Growth — 315,000 new students**
- **New Classrooms to Accommodate Student Population Growth (based on 25 pupils per class) — 12,611 (7 per day)**
- **New Schools Needed — 378 (K-8) + 78 (9-12) = 456 new schools**

Cost of New Facilities	
■ Funding Needed to Accommodate Student Population Growth (based on $10,000 per new student, plus land costs of 25% of new construction costs)	$ 3.94 billion
■ Class Size Reduction	$ 1.25 billion
Cost of Facility Improvements	
■ Deferred Maintenance	$ 3.00 billion
■ Modernization — including technology upgrades & retrofits	$11.66 billion
■ Child Care	$ 0.25 billion
Total Estimated Cost	$20.10 billion

Data: California Department of Education — EdSource 4/98

How Can California Meet Its School Facility Needs?

What will it take for California to provide adequate and appropriate school facilities for close to six million public school students?

For one, local communities and the state as a whole must invest more in school facilities. Funds can come from several sources. State funds, which have historically accounted for nearly half of funding for school facilities, come from the passage of voter-approved state bonds. Local sources include general obligation bonds and fees assessed on real estate developers when they undertake new projects.

The Governor and Legislature have the authority to put the matter of increased funding before California's voters. They can put on the ballot an adequate statewide bond measure and/or a constitutional amendment to reduce the approval threshold for local bond elections. If they do so, then California's voters could make the decision about how important it is to invest in public school facilities.

EDFACT

For a more in depth examination of the school facilities issue, order the April 1998 EdSource report *California's School Facilities Predicament* from the EdSource office for $4 (plus $2 shipping and handling).

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